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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the role of specific functional communication skills in the choice of peers within a small social network in a single population: older Afro-American women. Subjects were nine women aged 55-79 attending a senior citizens' center. A questionnaire was used by subjects to rate the importance they attach to 26 specific expressive and receptive communication skills. A sociogram was designed to allow recording of the subjects' choice of partners for social activities including eating meals, taking walks, watching television, playing cards, talking seriously, playing games, talking casually, shopping, sharing a room, and taking a trip. Results showed no statistically significant relationships between self-reported value on communication skills and the frequency with which a partner was chosen for social activities, but some consistency was found in how subjects chose partners. Two individuals ranking themselves highest in the importance of communication skills, and making little distinction between expressive and receptive skills, were consistently selected by peers for interpersonal interaction. Subjects reporting the greatest discrepancy in importance between expressive and receptive skills were the least often chosen for interaction. It is concluded that subjects with the highest self-esteem, as indicated by their questionnaire responses, may be seen similarly by their peers. (MSE)

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INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND PEER SELECTION OF AFRO-AMERICANS

Faith L. Jackson

Concern for the elderly is a continually growing issue in this country. Several aspects of the aged population are beginning to be investigated in light of the fact that this population represents a rapidly increasing segment of the society. This study is devoted to examining the interpersonal or social aspects of older Afro-American citizens. The literature does not report much information regarding the informal social lines of elderly people in general (Keith, 1982), and even less about minority groups in particular (Markides, 1983).

Older people with active friendships or interpersonal networks tend to have less need for support services even in the face of failing health (Moss, Gottesman, & Lleban, 1976). Patterns of assistance between friends within a social network may even be a critical factor in ameliorating adverse health conditions. Neuhaus and Neuhaus (1982) stress that successful coping strategies may often be facilitated by positive interaction with friends, and that temporary emotional support by a close friend may provide the needed aid toward a positive adjustment. Ethnographic research documents that, as a group, Blacks are involved in extensive family and friendship networks characterized by the frequent exchange of socioemotional support (Taylor,

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1986). There appears to be little doubt that interpersonal networks contribute to the emotional well-being of the elderly in general and Afro-Americans in particular in terms of emphasizing peer-group concerns.

Self-esteem is observed to play a major role in the interpersonal social network of the elderly. The older person's self-concept is often seen as a determining factor regarding how the individual will communicate with others, adjust successfully, and establish satisfying interaction with peers. Persons who have positive and realistic self-images tend to be more accepted and liked (Neuhaus and Neuhaus, 1982). Because the extent of social participation and friendship networks is such a critical issue in sustaining morale and a sense of well-being, it seems crucial to determine factors that add to the information pool regarding social ties among the elderly.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the basis for selecting certain individuals within a small social network is related to the importance those individials ascribe to specific functional communication skills.

METHODOLOGY

Included are descriptions of the following aspects of the methodology: the subjects, the independent and

dependent variables, the procedures, and the statistical treatment of the data.

Subjects. Nine Afro-American female subjects, ranging in age from 55 to 79 years of age (M = 70.0 years) participated in the study. Only female subjects were included because Afro-American males who attend the center were quite adamant about their refusal to participate. The subjects were part of a community group that was involved in a lunch and social activities program on a daily basis at a senior citizens center in Northwest Ohio. The program is funded by the Area Office on Aging. With exception of one subject who used a tripod cane to assist in walking, all subjects were mobile and capable of engaging in the social activities.

Independent variable. A self-report questionnaire, the Functional Communication Skills Questionnaire (Payne-Johnson, 1986), was used to determine the subjects' perceptions of the importance they attached to certain communication skills. The Functional Communication Skills Questionnaire (FCSQ) contains twenty-six items which appear theoretically relevant to the communication skills of elderly Afro-American adults.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Dependent variable. The sociogram was constructed by the investigator to allow the subjects to indicate their choices of partners for ten social activities. The sociogram included two dimensions: a list of the first names of the nine subjects (to be identified in this paper as Subjects A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I) and ten social activities. In a column below the names and to the left on the sociogram, ten actiities were listed, based on the recommendations offered by three nursing home directors, three social activity directors of senior citizen centers, and observions made by the investigator during visits to nursing homes. The activities include: (1) eating meals, (2) taking walks, (3) watching television, (4) playing cards, (5) talking seriously, (6) playing bingo (any game), (7) talking casually, (8) shopping, (9) sharing a room, and (10) taking a trip.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Procedure. The FCSQ was administered to the nine subjects as a group. The investigator guided the subjects through each of the 26 items by giving directions and reading each item aloud. Repeating any item was done as many times as necessary upon request. A graduate student in the Communication Disorders Department at Bowling Green State University received training and assisted in the administration of the task by being certain that the

subjects marked every item with only one response. The task was presented immediately after lunch and completed in approximately thirty minutes.

The scale requires the subjects to indicate how important certain communication skills are to them. If the skill is felt to be "Very Important", the suject rates it as a 5; if the skill is felt to be "Important", he or she rates it 4; if the skill is "Somewhat Important", it is rated 3; if the skill is "Not Too Important", he or she rates it 2; and if the skill is perceived to be "Not Important At All", the subject rates it as 1. The values of all twenty-six items for each subject were added, and thus, FCSQ scores could range from 26 (1 x 26) to 130 (5 x 26).

The FCSQ is broadly separated into two categories: ten Expressive (E) Skills (telling, asking, talking, and naming) and sixteen Receptive (R) Skills (reading, understanding, and writing). If the subjects indicated that all ten expressive skills were "Very Important" to them, the total points would be 50 (Very Important = 5 x 10 items). If all the sixteen receptive skills were "Very Important" to them, the total points would be 80 (Very Important = 5 x 16 items). Percentages were derived by dividing the subjects' number of expressive points by 50 and the receptive points by 80.

The subjects responded to the sociogram two days later, again immediately after the lunch meal. The subjects had

previously agreed to participate in this second part of the study so they were anxious to get started and curious to see what the sociogram entailed. They were directed to read each of the ten activities listed on the sociogram. Each activity was followed by five blank spaces. The subjects were then asked to place the letter corresponding to the person listed above that they would most prefer to have join them in the activity. The letter corresponding to that person was placed on the first blank, labeled first choice. They were then directed to fill in the remaining four spaces with their next four choices of partners in descending order of preference. The first choice person is accorded a value of five points and fifth choice person a value of one point. The number of points for each subject, in accordance with the order they were preferred, was tallied. A total sociogram score was derived for each subject as well as the number of times each subject was selected as a first choice preference (see Illustration 2). Thus, an invividual could be accorded as many as 450 points if chosen first (5 points) by all subjects (9) for all activities (10).

Statistical treatment of the data. An analysis of variance was performed on the subjects' scores from the FCSQ.

RESULTS

Two subjects, A and E, scored all twenty-six items as "Very Important" to them, thus yielding scores of 130 points each. These subjects expressed no differences between the two categories of skills, expressive and receptive. They were also consistent with regards to how they were selected by their peers on the sociogram. Whether only first choice was selected, or first three choices, or all five choices were computed, Subject A was always first and Subject E always fifth, at midpoint. The remaining subjects' scores in descending order were: Subject F, 123 points; Subject B, 120 points; Subjects H and G, 114 points each; Subject D, 113 points; Subject I, 107 points; and Subject C, 105 points.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Illustration 3 indicates the number of times each subject was selected as the first choice for each of the activities. Subject A, the most preferred, collectively received 245 points (54%). The remaining subjects' scores and percents of total choices on the sociogram in descending order were: Subject H, 194 (43%); Subject I, 191 (42%); Subject B, 171 (38%) Subject E, 141 (31%); Subject F, 123 (27%); Subject C, 98 (22%); Subject D, 93 (21%); and Subject G, 66 (15%).

Subject A was most preferred as the person with whom to watch television and play cards--- both passive activities. She was chosen at least twice as the first choice in the other eight social activities, gathering 23 of 90 (26%) of the possible selections. Subject B, who received the next highest first choice selections, 16 out of 90 (18%), was preferred four times for one activity, playing bingo, and at least once for the remaining nine. Subject F was also chosen at least once for every activity, 13 out of 90 (14%). Subjects A, B, and F were the only subjects who were never omitted as a first preference by someone for all ten social activities.

Four subjects indicated the greatest dispartity between the expressive and receptive categories on the FCSQ: Subject H, E = 68%, R = 100%; Subject C, E = 68%, R = 89%; Subject D, E = 76%, R = 94%; Subject G, E = 78%, R = 94%. Of these four subjects, Subject G was consistently the least preferred partner on the sociogram. She was the only subject who was never chosen as a first selection for at least one of the ten social activities. Subject D, while not last, stayed consistently in the bottom third on the the FCSQ and on the sociogram. She was selected as first choice twice in one social activity, playing cards, and that remained the only activity for which she was chosen. Subject C had three first choice selections, one each for talking seriously, talking casually, and eating meals.

Results of the analysis of variance for the nine subjects on the sociogram indicated that the mean scores were not significant ($F = 1.67$; $df = 1,7$; $p = 0.315$).

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results of the study, draws some conclusions from the findings, suggests possible limitations of the study, and indicates directions for future research.

The conclusions that might be drawn are that the subjects who appeared to perceive all the functional skills as "Very Important", whether expressive or receptie, were more likely to be consistently ranked by their peers. Those subjects who indicated indifference were more likely to be less preferred. Another consideration suggests that the self-concept might be less dependent on external factors than on an internal orientation which emphasizes consistency in self-concept. Those subjects who reported themselves perceiving all the skills as "Very Important" possibly exude greater self-esteem, and therefore, are perceived by their peers in a similar manner.

The fact that the FCSQ is a self-report instrument may be a definite limitation of the study. The investigator must rely totally on what the subjects report about themselves. Also, the investigator would like to have included elderly Afro-American males, either as a

comparative group or as part of the same study. While this would have added another dimension to the study, the lack of male cooperation was beyond the researcher's control. Future research might include a larger sample of both sexes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the importance of functional communication skills as self- repoorted by a small nucleus of elderly Afro-American females. The purpose was to determine whether the self-reported results bore a relationship to the frequency with which participants selected each other for social activities. While no statistically significant relationship was provided, the study did note some consistent trends with regards to how participants chose their partners. According to the sociogram, two subjects who ranked themselves highest on the FCSQ were consistently selected by their peers as interpersonal interactants. These same subjects demonstrated no difference between expressive and receptive items on the FCSQ. Subjects who self-reported the greatest difference between expressive and receptive skills also demonstrated consistency in that they were the least selected subjects as interpersonal interactants by the group. Self-esteem may play a role in subject selection for social activities. It appears that subjects who demonstrated high self-esteem, as manifested by the results of the FCSQ,

may be seen in a similar manner by their peers. The results of this study do add to the sparse pool of information dealing with the interpersonal and social aspects of one group of elderly persons in this society --- specifically, the Afro-American female.

ILLUSTRATION I

FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE (FCSQ)

DIRECTIONS: Please tell us how important you think each skill is in your daily life by rating it as:

5 - Very Important
4 - Important
3 - Somewhat Important
2 - Not too Important
1 - Not Important At All

1. Telling someone what today's date is.	5 4 3 2 1
2. Reading the magazine or newspaper.	5 4 3 2 1
3. Telling your doctor what bothers you.	5 4 3 2 1
4. Understanding what is going on in a church or religious service.	5 4 3 2 1
5. Reading a prescription label.	5 4 3 2 1
6. Asking someone what the date is.	5 4 3 2 1
7. Reading the Bible or Koran.	5 4 3 2 1
8. Understanding traffic signs and signals.	5 4 3 2 1
9. Reading the time on a clock.	5 4 3 2 1
10. Talking face-to-face with family and friends.	5 4 3 2 1
11. Telling a clerk what you want to buy in a store.	5 4 3 2 1
12. Understanding the signs on a restroom door.	5 4 3 2 1
13. Writing checks or money orders for your bills.	5 4 3 2 1
14. Talking to your minister/rabbi/priest.	5 4 3 2 1
15. Reading a medical/dental appointment card.	5 4 3 2 1
16. Understanding your bills and the amount(s) due.	5 4 3 2 1
17. Asking for assistance or help.	5 4 3 2 1
18. Reading the message on a birthday or holiday card.	5 4 3 2 1
19. Telling about yourself.	5 4 3 2 1
20. Understanding what your doctor says to you.	5 4 3 2 1
21. Naming your personal belongings.	5 4 3 2 1
22. Reading signs for the bus or subway.	5 4 3 2 1
23. Understanding when someone asks for assistance of help.	5 4 3 2 1
24. Talking on the telephone with family and friends.	5 4 3 2 1
25. Reading signs on doors like "exit" and "push".	5 4 3 2 1
26. Reading the directions to a place.	5 4 3 2 1

ILLUSTRATION 2

SOCIOGRAM

Instructions

First read the list of given names, then read the list of activities. After reading both of these, read the list of activities again and then for each activity, indicate the choice of persons (according to the letter to the left of their names), in order of preference, with whom you would like to do that activity.

Names

Subject A
Subject B
Subject C
Subject D
Subject E
Subject F
Subject G
Subject H
Subject I

Activities	(1st)	(2nd)	(3rd)	(4th)	(5th)
1. Eating meals	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Taking walks	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Watching T.V.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Playing cards	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Talking seriously	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. Playing (bingo or any game)	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. Talking casually	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. Shopping	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. Sharing a room	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. Taking trips	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

ILLUSTRATION 3

Number of First Choice Selections of Ten Social Activities for Nine Subjects

Name of subjects in descending order of preference	Eating Meals	Taking Walks	Watching T.V.	Playing Cards	Talking Seriously	Playing Bingo	Talking Casually	Shop-ping	Sharing Room	Taking Trips	Total Number and Percent
(1) Subject A	2	2	4	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	23/26%
(2) Subject B	1	2	1	1	1	4	2	1	2	1	16/18%
(3) Subject F	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	13/14%
(4) Subject I	1	2	2	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	13/14%
(5) Subject E	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	3	2	10/11%
(6) Subject H	1	2	0	2	1	1	0	1	0	2	10/11%
(7) Subject C	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3/3%
(8) Subject D	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2/2%
(9) Subject G	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0/0%
	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	90

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